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Course IV - The Geostrategic Context

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The Caribbean and the United States into the New Century

The future of the Caribbean * and the future of the United States are increasingly woven together into a fabric of mutual advantage and mutual jeopardy. The Caribbean is our third border, and the ancestral home of millions of Americans from the days of our first Secretary of the Treasury to our current Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. It is a source of trained professionals and illegal migrants, sugar and narcotics, Nobel laureates and revolutionaries, oil and unserviceable debts. As improvements in communications and transportation links accelerate this flow of products, people, and ideas - in both directions - it will become more and more obvious that the successes and failures of one neighbor will spill over onto the other.

Despite all this, the Caribbean has at best been of peripheral concern to the United States over the past hundred years, and our relations have generally been caught in a cycle of long periods of actual or perceived neglect on America's part punctuated by intense periods of frantic activity - often military - gradually subsiding back into neglect until the cycle repeats itself. Today, however, we can no longer afford the luxury of ignoring the

* For these purposes, I am considering the Caribbean to include the islands of the Caribbean Sea, excluding Puerto Rico and the US Virgins, plus Belize and Guyana.

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Caribbean since even a casual glance reveals:

- the Coast Guard and the Navy sitting perhaps permanently off Haiti to prevent tens or hundreds of thousands of refugees from sailing to Florida.
- Fidel Castro cowed but not totally defanged as fears mount that his last act of defiance may be to leave a nation which will tear itself apart in the manner of Romania or Soviet Georgia.
- Well entrenched narco-smugglers in Jamaica attempting to suborn the democratic process, while oil rich Trinidad and Tobago contends with Islamic Fundamentalist coup plotters.
- Weakened economies everywhere which need to diversify, modernize, and get out from under crushing debt burdens.

The United States no longer has a choice as to whether or not to stay involved in the Caribbean. Geography, history, migration patterns, and our porous border have made the choice for us. Should we attempt to ignore all these factors, or if we mistakenly attempt through heavy-handed intervention to force individual nations to rationalize their economies and societies, we will discover that the regions many problems become our own.

Background - When Americans think of the Caribbean, most picture sandy beaches and rum punches, a few will conjure up images of Haitian or Cuban migrants on flimsy boats while the rest may think of Rastafarians and drug smugglers. What they will not think of is a vast region of over 20 nations and almost thirty million people who are our closest neighbors after Canada and Mexico. Part of the reason for this is the surface diversity of the region's peoples, cultures and ideologies. There is, for instance, a hodgepodge of political systems, including independent nations, dependencies, overseas departments, and commonwealths. Some islands vigorously oppose efforts to be "decolonized", while others seek to succeed from the newly independent grouping they

have always been part of. They range in size from Saba, whose population could fit into a suburban multiplex theater, to Cuba with over eleven and a half million people. Citizens of the region speak English, Spanish, French, Dutch, and numerous dialects. They hail originally primarily from Africa but also from Europe, Asia, the Sub-continent, and the Americas before 1492. Living standards range from the comfortable (Barbados and Trinidad) to the wretched (Haiti and increasingly Cuba). As dramatic as all these differences are, however, those factors which they have in common - a colonial past, predominantly agricultural and tourist based industries, huge debt burdens, surplus populations for existing conditions, untapped natural resources, and proximity to the United States will be the factors which increasingly are important in the next century.

Geostrategic importance - A case can usually be made that any given region is of either vital or negligible geostrategic importance depending on the perspective of the viewer. As a general rule, though, the closer a region is to the viewer, the more important it will be. In this spirit, it is worth noting that the Caribbean is snuggled up against the "soft underbelly" of the States and affords an open highway for the transit of people and things for both good and bad purposes. Further, the trade routes approaching the Panama Canal go through the Caribbean Sea and this point has been considered noteworthy at least since the days of Taft's Secretary of State, Philander C. Knox, who stated "The logic of political geography and of strategy and now our tremendous national interest created by the Panama Canal make the safety, the peace, and the prosperity of --- the zone of the Caribbean of paramount importance to the government of the United States." ¹

Population - the Caribbean is, after Mexico, the largest source of immigrants to the United States. Legal immigration has risen in recent decades from 470,000 in the 60's, to 870,000 in the 80's.² These figures can be expected to climb even higher in the 90's, given changes in the immigration code. Illegal immigration is at least as high and

probably much higher. Should internal or external restraints be removed in Haiti and Cuba, a million or more refugees could reach Florida in a single year.

Drugs - The Caribbean region is a major producer of marijuana (particularly Jamaica) but also serves as a transshipment route for cocaine. Further, many drug distribution networks in the States are run by Jamaican and, more recently, Guyanese, often illegals themselves.

Economic resources - In addition to abundant sunshine and balmy breezes, the islands of the Caribbean and Guyana have extensive natural resources such as oil (Trinidad), bauxite (Jamaica and Guyana), gold, and diamonds (Guyana) and tropical hardwoods (primarily Belize). Also, the region (with certain large exceptions like Haiti) has a work force well educated by third world standards who have proven themselves to be industrious, quick learning workers given the right conditions (such as after emigrating to the States or Canada). Moreover, the United States has invested heavily in the region over the decades, in fields as diverse as agriculture, tourism, mining, and manufacturing. The region's 30 million people represent a market whose proximity should give us an advantage over far eastern economic rivals.

Political Stability - Despite a few disastrous diversions in the 60's and 70's with Marxist thought (Jamaica and Grenada) and strong man rule (Guyana) the former British colonies of the region are now all more or less practitioners of democratic rule with protection for freedom of speech and press. The French speaking islands range from Martinique, which is a department of France, to Haiti, which may be ungovernable without drastic societal changes. The Dutch islands are stable, though pulled in different directions over the question of local autonomy, while the Dominican Republic has developed a system which is not always pretty, but which works reasonably well of late. Finally, there is Cuba, which has suffered the downward spiral of oppression and slow economic collapse for over thirty years. Well over a million of its most productive citizens have permanently fled its shores, its economy, shorn of the billions in annual subsidy from the

Soviet Union, can no longer provide adequate goods and services to the public or itself - to the point where even the state security apparatus in some cases conducts surveillance on bicycles. The former revolutionary fervor of the population has melted away in ever increasing lines for scarce products. Fidel Castro, the "soul of the revolution" is now approaching 67 and after thirty-four years of absolute personal power spoke recently for the first time of a future when he might no longer rule the country. That Castro might voluntarily step down was once unimaginable but now may be wishful thinking on his part - Cuba is falling apart so fast that if he does not have the good fortune to die in office very soon, he may well be removed more dramatically by a welling up of a population unable to endure further hardship for no reason other than one man's tarnished dream.

American actions - As noted earlier, American policy toward the Caribbean - and most of Latin America for that matter - has shifted between long periods of somnambulism and shorter periods of hyperactivity. From the Monroe doctrine, through gunboat and dollar diplomacy, to the Alliance for Progress and the Enterprise of the Americas Initiative, the United States has always reserved for itself the right to call upon the last resort - the military - to keep or restore order in the region. This recourse to armed intervention, most recently in Grenada and Panama has flamed a reactive nationalistic fervor and helped foster a climate of suspicion among many Caribbean leaders. More generally, the tension created by the seeming contradiction of a need for greater regional integration and economic linkage to the US on one hand and a desire for maximum local political autonomy of the other has paralyzed many Caribbean intellectuals into doing nothing.

It is doing nothing, however, which is the least desirable option for the United States for the political and economic reasons discussed above. Moreover, it is unlikely that this can ever fully be the case again because increasingly our posture toward the Caribbean will be a domestic as well as a foreign policy issue. That is, over the past decade there has emerged an increasingly effective domestic lobby for Caribbean interests

consisting largely of immigrants from the region who have obtained citizenship - and who vote in greater than average numbers - but also including representatives of corporations, and human rights and religious groups. Given the anticipated continued high rate of emigration, the collective influence of this lobby will grow stronger and more vocal over the years just ahead. However, absent a comprehensive, understandable policy for the entire region, this lobby - like the US government - will lurch from one crisis to the next with little long term beneficial impact.

Vision of the Caribbean - To be a full partner of its larger neighbors to the North and the South in the twenty-first century, the Caribbean must be stable, democratic, and economically integrated. To achieve this, the first task is to build on the success of the many nations in the region which have preserved and expanded democratic institutions. Although many leaders, government and opposition alike, welcome American involvement in this field, the best source of assistance is the mutual support each country can give the other. Toward this end the US should encourage regional leaders to speak out in support of the democratic process and to condemn and isolate leaders who resort to extra-constitutional actions such as coups or the cancellation or excessive postponement of elections. Next, the existing organization for Caribbean unity, the Caribbean Community (Caricom) - which has disappointed many in the region because of its failure to tackle contentious issues involving sovereignty - must be revitalized. In a larger sphere than Caricom, but smaller than the United Nations is the Organization of American States (OAS), which could and should become the primary organization for conflict resolution in the hemisphere. Should military intervention be called for, the OAS provides a means to insert an armed force into a country with a minimum of distractions based on perceptions of American (or any other country engaged in unilateral action) ulterior motives. The United States and the OAS should encourage Caricom to tackle tougher issues and to expanded its membership beyond its base of former British colonies. The US should also work to help rationalize and expand trade and investment (in both directions). Again,

geography leads to the obvious need to eventually include the region in the North American Free Trade Association. (NAFTA). If this can not be achieved in the near term, a formal agreement similar to the one the European Community has with the Lome countries would assist in bringing the region into the orbit of the NAFTA. Recent actions with respect to debt forgiveness and rescheduling are in the right direction, but should be reviewed every few years to ensure that unworkable debt does not strangle fragile economies. Equally important, we should continue, even expand cultural and educational links, emphasizing the societal advantages of an open, democratic system.

Prospects for the achievement of many of the measures discussed above are actually quite good, as there is an increasing awareness of the advantages of economic integration and political stability among the new generation of Caribbean leaders, many of whom have relatives in, and have studied or travelled in, the United States and Canada. Great danger remains, unfortunately, for widespread disruption in the region if the massive problems of Haiti and Cuba are not quickly and peacefully resolved.

Haiti - Burdened by centuries of mismanagement and foreign intervention, suffering from hardships of near Biblical proportions, overpopulated, polluted, and seemingly without a future, Haiti requires immediate, decisive attention. Such attention should come not exclusively from the United States but from larger international organizations, such as the OAS. Deposed President Aristide is unpalatable for many reasons, and probably would be an ineffective leader, but he was the choice of the Haitian people and if we are serious about free elections, we must accept that sometimes candidates we don't prefer win. Aristide should be returned to power, by an OAS force if necessary, but he must also accept that his presidency will be judged in large measure by his conduct with respect to international standards on human rights and evolving hemispheric acceptance of market reforms of the economy. All assistance to Haiti should be dependent of compliance with such standards.

Cuba - Cuba is in many ways less readily "solvable" than Haiti. Our goal here must be to remove Castro and the entire communist party apparatus as quickly as possible, while minimizing the hardships suffered by the average Cuban and maneuvering to prevent the outbreak of civil discord when the inevitable fall of the Castro brothers occurs. Toward this end, the Cuban Democracy Act of 1992 continues and strengthens America's thirty year embargo against the Castro regime and has the expressed purpose of seeking to hasten its fall. This ambitious measure appears to be succeeding, if the daily visible collapse of the Cuban economy is any measure. Our policy must also, however, concern itself also with post - Castro Cuba and work toward a transition to democratic rule which is as smooth as possible - which will coincidentally decrease the number of individuals who head to sea in small boats seeking the shores of South Florida. (NOTE: If the Cuban communist government falls and a democratic successor takes over, the distinction between Cuban and Haitian "boat people" will blur. In principle, Cubans would no longer be fleeing communism and thus could be considered economic refugees, just like the Haitians). To do this, the US should maintain economic sanctions in those macroeconomic areas where the regime could draw succor but aggressively open and expand contacts in the educational, cultural, communications, and people to people fields. Such a policy could help reestablish links between the large expatriate Cuban community in the United States and their relatives and friends left behind. This in turn would create a safety net for the Cuban people which will ameliorate the hardships of the transition and give the Cubans an option between chaos at home or a dangerous crossing to Miami.

The Future - The nations of the Caribbean have been torn, ever since they achieved independence, between the desire for autonomy and recognition of the need for unity. Even those islands which have the most in common with one another, the former British colonies, have been unable to develop a workable formula for unity, despite numerous attempts. The first and best attempt at such an organization, the West Indies Federation was pulled apart by the force of island specific interests and the egos of their leaders

leaving only a world champion cricket team and various college campuses in its wreckage. (When Jamaica withdrew from the ten member federation, Trinidadian Prime Minister Eric Williams was asked if the remaining nine would try to continue as a group. He replied " 10 take away 1 leaves 0"). What is different now is that the end of the cold war and the failure of socialism worldwide has taken the ideological fire out of these discussions and left a cooler appreciation for the needs and aspirations of the Caribbean's citizens in the next century. Increasingly, the average citizen of the Caribbean is represented by a Guyanese with an Aruban wife who studied in Canada and works for a Trinidadian company in St. Lucia. He may also already have American citizenship.

¹ Quoted in Whirlpool by Robert A. Pastor Princeton Press

² INS - 1990 Statistical Yearbook